

Episode 50: Leslee Barnes Preschool for All Update

[00:00:00] Rafael Otto: Hi everyone. This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thanks for tuning in each week. I hope you do on Sundays at 4:30 PM. We are broadcasting on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro, you can find us streaming there as well. Or you can tune in at your convenience wherever you find your podcasts, including iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music, and as always on our website at childinst.org.

Today, I'm speaking with Leslee Barnes, director of the Preschool and Early Learning Division at Multnomah County. She is a fourth generation Oregonian who grew up in Northeast Portland and she has been a leading figure, working alongside others in the community, including Commissioner Jessica Vega Peterson in the development of Preschool for All which was approved by voters in November of 2020. Things have come a long way since then. And we're looking to get an update and just talk about what Preschool for All looks like today.

Leslee, welcome to the podcast.

[00:00:58] Leslee Barnes: Thanks for having me. Good to be back and give you kind of what's hot and happening right now in the world of Preschool for All.

[00:01:05] Rafael Otto: Yeah, it's great to have you back on here. You know, this has been really like, a groundbreaking measure that was passed, with a tax to go along with it, to fund Preschool for All and the expansion of facilities and those kinds of things. Really not just in Oregon, but nationally, this is really kind of the first of its kind in the country structured in this way.

So just give us an update as to where things are right now, as we're beginning to roll out. I know there was the initial application process that rolled out recently. Where're things at?

[00:01:38] Leslee Barnes: Well, yeah, so that application became live to the public back in April, and we got an astounding 1100 applications from families. We have

about 675 slots so we're in the midst of looking at those applications, sorting, matching. I mean, there's a lot to think about when you're thinking about what families want, what's available right now in this leg of our implementation.

So that's where we're kind of at right now. I'm really hoping that, our initial thoughts that parents would get notification of their choice and ability to be matched in July. But we're thinking that might come actually a little bit sooner. So, that's where we're at right now. So it's pretty...

[00:02:17] Rafael Otto: So demand has been high.

[00:02:19] Leslee Barnes: Very high, very high, yes. But you know, not surprising, right? This has been something the community said they wanted it, needed it for a long time. So it's aligned to what we had hoped would happen.

[00:02:30] Rafael Otto: Right, right, right. Expected. Are there... just given that and given the rollout, what are some of the challenges that you're dealing with now and what have been some of the recent successes?

[00:02:40] Leslee Barnes: I think overall there's always this challenge of the fact that we have 1100 folks that need this service and we don't have that many slots. So I think just imagining the disappointment, maybe for some of those families and how we're really trying to connect to other resources that are available for preschool in our area.

So there's that. And I think just really thinking about, what is the right match for folks? You know, they're able to rank their top three choices and trying to get based on language or location or hours, if you need it year round, if you need it part day. There's just so many things that, you know, you have to think about, to get at, what people hope to receive from us.

And I think really the other challenge, knowing that we have that many applications, we need to get more folks that want to do this work. And so what are the challenges around workforce and physical cities? So those are the things we're looking at right

now, because we've been hearing from those existing providers that got slots that hiring is a thing that's difficult for them.

[00:03:37] Rafael Otto: Right, I imagine they're struggling with not only finding people, but also being able to pay people enough. It's common in the working world right now. A lot of employers are struggling with this I imagine it's the same with early care providers

[00:03:50] Leslee Barnes: Yeah, it's the same. And I think we've noticed, you know, nationwide, you know, with COVID that, even though people are offering a lot of higher wages for folks, it's still not attracting them back to work. And so I think we're trying to figure out what that is. It was a problem before with people recruiting staff. But our wage, I think is attractive for the field now, so that's one thing. But it's about... What are the other things that people are looking for, as a benefit to them to come back or think about this work again. So it's like the benefits part of it, time off, time to do lesson planning. Um, you know, so what are the things that are attracting people back to this work? So they don't choose to stay working at a restaurant or stay... you know, bartending makes more money. But what is the thing that will pull them back?

So we're thinking about, what are the pathways to leadership for folks? Are there certificates, degrees? What can we offer folks as a way to think about this as a long-term career?

[00:04:40] Rafael Otto: Right, right. That makes sense. I believe we've talked about this before on the facility side of things. There has been a lack of facilities in terms of expanding how Preschool for All is going to reach more kids and families. What's that looking like these days? Where are new classrooms being located?

[00:04:57] Leslee Barnes: Right, so right now the classrooms that we're working with are people that are already in business, already in the business of doing chapter. So we have some slots that live with, school districts. Head Start, individual family, child providers, independent centers, they're located really nicely along I-205 corridor, a lot of east county, very diverse applicant pool that we had on the family side and the provider side so that's really promising. But as far as the brick and mortar side of

facilities... so, we've been gathering information about what are the barriers for folks like, is it, you know, when you go to the city and find out all the things that you need to do, or are you getting all the right information, being connected to the right sources for that?

So there are different organizational governmental bodies that tell your ability to expand. And so we invested some money in a navigator position that we hope to partner with to figure out like, just right now, what are people experiencing that are actually in the midst of trying to expand, or maybe even just put in a small egress window in their home, for example.

But coming soon, we will be having, what's called a facilities fund. Which will have money in a pot and we'll have an RPQ come out for a partner to manage that fund. So that will be available for someone to say, "Yes, I want to do this work and manage this fund." And that will be available for applicants in July.

So the application for the entity coming available soon, and those funds, probably with our procurement and all of that, probably won't be available until next Spring.

[00:06:24] Rafael Otto: If I'm a parent with young children who are preschool age, maybe I'm on the waiting list. If I'm on the waiting list, what can I expect?

[00:06:30] Leslee Barnes: So, you'll expect to get a letter, email, call and depending on, you know, we're going to get people some time to respond with, this is who you were matched with and does this match meet your needs? So that's the other thing, because we had such a small pool, we allowed people to rank their top three choices and hopefully depending on, you know, how popular a choice was, maybe you got your second choice, right? And hopefully that still meets your needs. And then you have a certain amount of time to respond back. And then you individually enroll with that program. So we're more of the conduit for getting you the slot and then you would then have an enrollment process with the individual.

[00:07:06] Rafael Otto: I wanted to ask you just about the, "For All" aspect of it. Because I think some people are wondering, is this really for everyone? If you're

someone who could afford preschool, will this program help you also? What does that look like?

[00:07:19] Leslee Barnes: Yeah. I mean, The intention is that we're building a universal system and that means that in 10 years, it will be Preschool For all, right? And so we're trying to prioritize folks that maybe can't afford it, or doesn't have access to like a preschool setting that meets their linguistic needs or geographical need, or, you know, there's going to be a lot of things in there.

So for those folks that can afford to pay it now love their preschool setting, this is probably not going to be an opportunity for you. Your needs are currently being met in the system, right? Ideally, everyone could interact with Preschool For All like they would their local public school. Everyone gets right free public school, but we have to build, like we said, the infrastructure before, I have to find the workforce to get that available to everyone.

So, you know the only two criteria is, you know, you live in Multnomah County, you have a three and four year-old. But within that, we really are trying to find the people who have least, the least access now. And then as we build in more slots, we hope to reach everyone in that 10 year period.

[00:08:15] Rafael Otto: Got to think about it long-term, right?

[00:08:17] Leslee Barnes: Yeah.

[00:08:19] Rafael Otto: So when you're talking about providers, I'm curious about how is the county supporting the development of culturally and linguistically diverse providers?

[00:08:27] Leslee Barnes: Yeah, I think that is really what we're spending most of our time on. Because we know that that's our best opportunity to serve communities of color, communities that don't speak English as a first language, that they will make those choices based on a relationship to that provider. And so we wanted to make

sure that we weren't putting unnecessary barriers for those smaller businesses to interact with Preschool For All.

So some of the things we're doing is we have partners that will be working with those childcare providers. So, MESO or Micro Enterprise of Oregon will be helping on the business side of it. So they will not have a contract directly with the county, which can be kind of burdensome. They'll actually receive the funds through MESO. And so we'll also be walk alongside them as a business if there's other needs that arise, marketing, you know, maybe they want some other kinds of support as a business that they can access that way. Also have coaching through our other partner Childcare Resource and Referral of Multnomah County.

So that's like your practices, your curriculum, how you set up a classroom, how do you design policies around kind of how you interact with families, meals, service, field trips... all those kinds of things will be what they will handle for them as well. So I think that's our best opportunity to support those providers.

[00:09:41] Rafael Otto: Okay. Just to go back to the workforce question. And I know young children in the state of Oregon, and I think this is true in Multnomah County also, are really the most diverse group of kids in the state right now. And a lot of people are thinking about how the workforce can reflect the kids who are in the system and receiving those services.

So what kinds of things are you doing around diversifying the workforce and supporting the development of the workforce in that way?

[00:10:09] Leslee Barnes: Right. I think one of the things is that we really did a lot of work to do outreach to existing providers that reflect those diverse communities. So those center-based programs that might have a particular cultural lens. How do we invite them to the system and then help them find staff and cultivate them and what are the educational opportunities for them?

One of the things that I think is unique, we've been exploring like other models that work in other states. So we found there's one particular program in Washington

called My Brother's Teacher that we're hoping this could be a solution to thinking about diverse teachers, black male teachers, specifically that want to enter the field and they start exploring this opportunity for them in high school. So maybe they work at a childcare program, in summer a preschool program, and then they go to college and major in that, and they have a peer mentor that helps them, as another teacher to help them through that process. So we're thinking about long-term how to build leadership. Where are the places where we can kind of lean into and say, hey, you know, at this community college, what are you doing for folks that speak Spanish? Do you have a certificate program there in their language so that they are supported in our system as well? So we're like... finding places that already have examples of that, that we can replicate or helping to fund or support like a scholarship at a particular entity.

[00:11:26] Rafael Otto: Right, right. That makes sense. I'm thinking about some of the developments that have happened at the state level and the bill that banned suspension and expulsion. I know that will roll out over time. It's not in effect immediately, but I'm wondering how you're thinking about that and what that rollout will look like in the Preschool For All environment. Like what that will look like, once that ban goes into place and what your providers are thinking about it?

[00:11:54] Leslee Barnes: Right. So for us, I mean, that's stays... so I'm helping with some of it at the state level, with how that looks as that rolls out. But really it's not a ban and Preschool For All. We've already said that this is not a practice that will support in our system. So what we're trying to find out is what are the things that makes us successful placement for a child?

And so it's this opportunity for family choice. But then it's also an opportunity for a provider to lean into, like, what are the things that I might be lacking? Is it a particular bias? So I need to do some self-reflection. Do I need to know about inclusive practices? Do I know enough about child development?

Like, what is typical behavior with this boy? Is there trauma in this family that I need to know about that is impacting this child's behavior, too? So we're talking about relationship building, really having intentional conversations. Not just your typical

enrollment thing, where you're filling out permission for sunscreen, but how are you connecting with that family so they feel comfortable talking about some needs that, that may be impacting the child's behavior? Maybe there's a large change in the family. So we think there's a lot of things that need to be tackled before we think about this is not a good placement for a child.

We usually think it's an adult behavior that impacts a child. There's a lot of things that... a very small percentage of children can't be in a typical classroom. It's less than 10%. If we look at the pyramid of behaviors or the very small percentage that really need mental help with that. And so the coaches I mentioned earlier are going to help that. We also have invested money in behavioral health at the health department. And so they'll actually, they've increased, oh gosh, probably did 10 almost, 10 FTE to help support us alongside providers to make sure those placements go well for both the provider and the child.

[00:13:42] Rafael Otto: Right. And it really is about kind of taking a look at all of the factors that are influencing a child and how a child is interacting with the adults in their world and making sure that there are supports in place for that. You mentioned mental health, behavioral health supports those kinds of things.

[00:14:01] Leslee Barnes: Right. right. We haven't done a good job with this. I mean, really have said, "Hey, providers work this on your own. And maybe someone will come and observe this kiddo." The providers, to the point of them being afraid of being in a situation with a child they feel like they cannot provide services for. I know that's a real fear. But what we're trying to say is we want to have the conversations about what is going on in the classroom early on so the more that we do that, and the more we support them, we know that those placements can be successful.

[00:14:29] Rafael Otto: Yeah. I'm curious, just, if you could talk about what lessons you've learned at these early stages. I know you've been involved in the early childhood field for a long time. But what have you learned at this point that would be relevant for people, anyone really thinking about how this program is going to work? Maybe if you're working on efforts to expand Preschool for All in other counties, that kind of thing. What have you learned at this point? What can you share with us?

[00:14:56] Leslee Barnes: Yeah, I think one of the things we haven't done well is really talk to families about what they really want and need. That just sounds silly, but a lot of the work that we've done to like, help childcare and think about all the things... we've not invited the parents to the table. So they can say, this is what this really looks like. This is what we really need, not as telling them what we think they need.

So that's one thing. And I think just being really receptive to changing our course, if need be. So not only are we inviting parents, we're really telling providers we really need to learn what works well for you too. Like contracting with you. But we do want this to be a relational thing where you can say, you know, there's this policy that doesn't really work and this is why.

So what are the ways that we can really bring providers along? So empower them to work with us in a real way, because we know that a lot of systems, you know, have not been good partners for providers. And so we need to build a sense of trust. And so we've got to give opportunities for this really good feedback and making sure we're just there and listening. I think there's a lot to learn if we believe what providers say is happening with them.

[00:16:07] Rafael Otto: And that surprisingly can be, can be a challenge.

[00:16:11] Leslee Barnes: Yeah, it can be, it can be. The other thing is I think we have some kind of, I'm going to say a tainted notion of what quality looks like in a childcare environment.

[00:16:22] Rafael Otto: Say more about that.

[00:16:23] Leslee Barnes: Yeah. I think we have like, measurements and tools and all that that tell us this is what it looks like, but still parents pick it based on what it feels like to them in kind of a heart string. So even if we make it look like, you know, all the things that we think a parent would want, they may still choose this over here. And so what is it about that choice and how do we support that choice? Maybe the provider is a little dog-eared, maybe the space needs some sprucing up, or maybe they need

some understanding about a particular practice that can help build success for a child, but the parent still is going to go there.

So how do we meet providers where they are? Quality looks a lot different than I think what we what we think it is. What does the parent say it is? Is it relational? Is there social, emotional supports? Are they eating the kind of food that feels familiar to their home? It's just been one of those kinds of things that I think aren't measured well. Or people say well, I don't think that's important, that's not school. This is school, supporting children and being culturally responsive and having them be able to speak their mind and read books and play outside, get dirty , interact with other children. And because if it can't do that, they can't really do well when they get to the K-12 space. They have to be able to be able to speak their mind and interact socially with other children, get their needs met from adults too. That's really what this is about. I mean, people want them to be able to write their name before they get they're going to learn how to write their name.

I don't know any adults don't to write their name. They're they're going to learn that, but if they can't get their needs met without hitting someone that is the thing that we have to think and help them think through and, you know, self- calming and all those kinds of things. Those are important things

[00:18:03] Rafael Otto: Yeah. A lot of that falls under the umbrella of social, emotional health for young kids right?

[00:18:09] Leslee Barnes: Right. It absolutely does. It absolutely does. And I know that, you know, some of the things we are talking about, especially that work with the state like how, what do we call this? Like, if you tell a parent your, your child needs the mental health therapist, they might be like, "Absolutely not, I'm not...," so we need to call it something that makes sense.

It's social, emotional supports for children. If you say they need behavioral, mental health, a parent may not accept that help because this is a kind of a loaded, especially in communities of color, there's some connotations with that. They don't know if that label's going to follow them when they get to the K-12 systems. So we

need to really make sure we know that parents know what we mean when we say what it is the support that that child actually needs.

[00:18:48] Rafael Otto: And anything else that you want to mention in terms of how people are thinking about quality? There's sort of the research way of thinking about quality, or people are focused on curriculum or whatever it is. So what else is important for us to understand?

[00:19:03] Leslee Barnes: I think we need to forget these check boxes. What does it feel like when you go into the classroom? Where are the children joyful? You know, there's those things that, you know, you can always cheat on a test. I can know you're coming and pull out a check thing and do all the things, have the number of books on the shelf, all that, and not be connecting with a child, not be meeting the needs of a family.

So how do we really take time to observe that? And so I think because people can't quantify that and you have to take time to get there, there are ways to notice that. I think we need to get away from these measures. And that doesn't mean that a measure means nothing. I mean, they need to have some books in the room and they'll, and so we can like say that, but it's not, you're not in Preschool For All because you don't have the things on the shelf because children are there.

And so we want to support the children that are there and give you the things you need to do this work well, So, yeah, quality is just a loaded term. It's becoming kind of a bad word in ECE right now, and I can see why.

[00:20:05] Rafael Otto: Quality and high quality, right?

[00:20:07] Leslee Barnes: Oh. Especially the high quality one, so subjective. Like it doesn't mean what a lot of people think it means.

[00:20:14] Rafael Otto: Right. You know, when I asked you the lessons learned question, I think you, you mentioned a few things and some of that was also advice. But I just sort of wanted to get your thoughts on advice that you would give to other

local leaders. Because I know there are other communities thinking about what Preschool For All could look like in their county or in their community.

And there are people that are working on it. There are commissioners working on it. What advice do you have for those groups? Sage advice, words of caution, anything that comes to mind about, rolling this out?

[00:20:47] Leslee Barnes: Right. Do it in some form. It doesn't have to be exactly the way we did it again. I said earlier, the community voice, really being there, listening to folks, getting rid of your preconceived notions of what qualities should look like. I think that it's really meeting a parent need that's been there for a long time. I think there's many ways probably to get at how to give folks an opportunity to be in preschool. But I think if you don't take the time to really adhere, you know, every community is a little bit different. So, I mean, I mean, we had a whole process in which we brought lots of folks to the table to get lots of perspectives, business, philanthropy, everybody has a piece this and everybody can come to support.

Even if your community doesn't have a tax, there's some employers around that can pitch in. There's some people with some space that can pitch in. There are some ways that you could work at, you know, the county level, your city level about coding. There's things that you can do that don't cost the tax to make it easier for the people that are doing it now, and those things that you do now can build us something for the future. When we see, you know, all the small things, because we're so siloed in the work that we do, I think by just taking time to hear what are the barriers right now for people doing this work, what is a barrier for a childcare provider, a parent, and just start using the fund you already have to make that work, is where you can start.

[00:22:11] Rafael Otto: Yeah, that makes sense. And you mentioned the parent need around this also, and I feel like parents are just desperate, like they're crying out for this kind of support. There's that infrastructure argument and that it is in many ways I think true, because in order for parents to go to work, they need to have a place that is safe and nurturing and where their kids can learn and experience love and all of those things, right? So they need those places and parents want to work and be able

to send their kids to a place that they know is safe. And I just hear more and more parents like, really needing and wanting this.

[00:22:51] Leslee Barnes: Yeah. And they don't, they've been made to make these decisions really on their own, not the decision, but there's not a real choice. Sometimes just whatever's open, right? And so, if a friend has a place they like kind of thing, like we haven't helped people make these decisions in a way that are really meaningful for them and I think that's what we need to do. Like what is the information? What are the resources? It's not there for them. You're just kind of on your own and I think us having a system like this means you're not on your own.

And maybe there's more information about how to make these informed choices and how it can look different. 'Cause I know like for some people will say, like, I only want my child in a center, a place that looks like a school. And they'll skip over the family childcare provider because they think that the place that looks like the school building has to be better quality than that family childcare provider. But we can inform them that you can actually get the same outcome here. This might actually be a better choice for your child. They might need a smaller, more relational environment, right, than this other kind of place.

And so we need to be able to like, say how this is similar and different in why how they're both... quality. How they're both good choices for them. 'Cause I think some people get hung up in the kind of place it exists versus what is it that the child receives and that you've received from that. So there's a lot of opportunity for us to give more information for parents to make informed choices about their preschool and childcare setting too.

[00:24:11] Rafael Otto: That makes sense. I know you've been in the field for a long time. You're known as a, an early childhood expert and an advocate. How does it feel to be at this point right now? With the expansion and to be in, you know, in charge of the rollout of Preschool For All. What does that feel like for you after working in the field for so long?

[00:24:31] Leslee Barnes: I think it's so funny that the other day we just did our budget presentation, right, for the county commissioners. Sometimes people are like, "How did you get here?" Not that you don't belong... But how did you get here? Like, you know, like I said, I'm from Portland, you know, went to Grant High School. I was a single parent for a while when I was in the military and struggling to find childcare, and figuring out what I was going to do with this baby.

And I remember, and I've told this story before. But I remember being like, here's a list of a few people, go meet them. And I just met a woman that reminded me of a family member. I was like, here's my baby. You know like, here's my baby. I... it felt good. I didn't know what her degree was. I mean, I just remember feeling a little by myself and how I wish there were more people coming to wrap their arms around me and making those decisions.

And then I also remember when I was in college, you know, trying to pay for that and how much of a struggle it was. And it's like, okay, you guys do want me to have a better life and graduate with a degree, but you're not willing to help me pay for childcare because I'm a student.

[00:25:30] Rafael Otto: Right.

[00:25:30] Leslee Barnes: And so you would pay for it if I had a job, but I can't get a job without this degree, you know?

So I've learned so many things over time. It's just this feeling like I'm the person that's here doing it. It's pretty amazing and I'm humbled by it. But again, I will tell people it's really a dream job. I've learned so many things of that to bring to this, and I connect with that family aspect, with this provider aspect. I get tickled. I'll tell you. I got to go visit sites and welcome folks to preschool, so to our pilot sites. The littles that came and greeted me... I tell you the greatest thing ever, greatest thing ever. You know, all the little personalities you meet in each of these preschool classrooms.

It's pretty amazing. And so I know next year there's going to be more of that joyous opportunity for them as well.

[00:26:17] Rafael Otto: Yeah, that's great. Okay. One more question for you. Think out a few years, I think you mentioned 10 years, we might be in a place where it feels more universal. What does it look like once things are up and running? What does it look like in Multnomah County for young kids?

[00:26:31] Leslee Barnes: Yeah. I'm like, I have like this fantasy that there's like people that design spaces for childcare providers that just come in kind of like plug and play, you know, and it's not this burden thing for them. And maybe there's a co-op with another provider that does something at this hour, you do that hour. I'm thinking about a lot of choices and, you know, preschool that is existing, maybe in the evening. It can in the evening. People work in the evening, you know, we're all trying to think about, well, how do we design this idea of learning time in the evening? Yeah, we can do that. We're still feeding children. There's still a social, emotional time. They're winding down for a rest. Those things are still happening. It's still prepared them for the future. But I think there's going to be lots of opportunity. I think I want to see a lot more collaboration with all the folks, you know, the folks in business, you know, philanthropy again, us. The system partners are like, we're trying to work towards this new reality that I think we'll be at, because I've been really excited about the people that have reached out to me that want to be a part of this. And so I think like we'll actually be in real relationship to them in a way that works for families.

[00:27:41] Rafael Otto: Sounds like a great vision.

[00:27:42] Leslee Barnes: Yeah. It'll happen.

[00:27:47] Rafael Otto: Well, that's our time for today, Leslie. Thanks so much for coming back on. It's been great talking with you again and I wish you best of luck with everything that you have on your plate.

[00:27:55] Leslee Barnes: All right. Nice talking to you as well.

[00:27:57] Rafael Otto: All right. Thank you.